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# MUSIC AND DRAMA

## SIGNIFICANT HAPPENINGS OF THE MONTH

Concerning some New Plays and some Skilful Acting.—A Word to Certain Young American Song-Writers.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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THERE are few more familiar complaints among the amiable Bourbons of criticism than that which assumes and deplores the absence of fine and skilful miming in the theater of to-day. We are told that the commercializing of our stage, the appalling celerity with which "stars" spring into being, the steady corruption of public taste, have brought the modern theater to a sorry pass, and have made it an easy victim to that devouring monster, the moving-picture play. What, indeed, have not our discouraged veterans of theatrical criticism said in dispraise of the theater of our time? No doubt it is easier to play the rôle of a critical Jeremiah than a critical Moses—at least it involves no perils, though it would seem to provide, at best, a melancholy joy. Yet there are some of us who prefer to side with the prophets of modernity—who would say of the drama of to-day what Mr. Henry M. Alden (a veteran whose youthful heart and spirit put to shame the croaking misoneism of indurated orthodoxy) has said of the fiction of to-day: that it has "more varied traits than that which preceded it, . . . a deeper dramatic interest, intellectually and emotionally, though it is changed to follow the pattern which life itself makes, yet in its course unfolding novel surprises; above all, it has more spontaneous play of human activities and a finer and more vital humor." And that, it seems to many, is no less true of the histrionism of our time. The other day Mr. Charles Frohman breathed life into the ancient arteries of Sardou's "Dora," garbing its deciduous frame in the habiliments of to-day,

and permitted Mr. Gillette, Miss Blanche Bates, Miss Marie Doro, and others to transform its conventionalized puppets into verifiable and veracious human beings. For these bounties he was rewarded as he might have expected to be rewarded; he was reproached because Mr. Gillette and the others did not play the familiar personages of "Diplomacy" as their predecessors had played them. There was small recognition of the fact that Mr. Gillette, for example, instead of playing Henry Beauclerc in the traditional manner, was sufficiently penetrating, imaginative, resourceful, original, and adroit to persuade you that you had known Henry, that you liked him, that you wanted to know him again. This was not Mr. Gillette trying to imitate Charles Coghlan, or Mr. Gillette imitating himself: it was an actor of creative intuition and rare skill setting before you a Beauclerc of irresistible humanity. This was acting of extraordinary competence—artistry that was stimulating, delightful, reassuring.

And when you have seen Mr. Gillette achieving this quiet triumph of recreative miming on the stage of the Empire, go to Mr. Winthrop Ames's Little Theater and observe that masterpiece of comic delineation, the Sam Thornhill of Mr. Kenneth Douglas in that delectable and delicately wicked portrayal of English Society, "A Pair of Silk Stockings." It would have been the easiest thing in the world to make Sam merely a "silly-ass" Briton of the familiar sort; and none but an actor of the finest artistic tact, the most scrupulous artistic honor, would have resisted the temptation. We doubt very much whether the light comedian of a generation ago would have forborne to make a caricature of this ventripotent young swell, with his foppish attire, his monocle, his amiable vacuity, his comic despairs, who, in disguise, secretes himself in his divorced wife's bedroom in order that he may win her back to him, and who is discovered and captured as a burglar while engaged in that adventure. Mr. Douglas does not play him in the spirit of farce; he does not for a moment caricature the part; on the contrary, he acts the rôle with such exquisite restraint, such unflagging veracity, so unobtrusively building up the character before your eyes by innumerable little strokes of subtle yet vivid portraiture, that the egregious Sam becomes and remains a part of your experience as a living and indefeasible personality.

Pursue your journey still further, now, to Wallack's, where is to be seen the Lieblers' production of Mr. Shaw's joyous "romance" (as he slyly calls it), "Pygmalion," and observe the inimitable performance of Mrs. Patrick Campbell, that former mistress of poetic tragedy and tragic-comedy, that erstwhile Electra, *Mélisande*, Mrs. Ebbsmith, as Eliza Doolittle, the cockney flower-girl of Covent Garden, who was made over into a fine lady by the phonetic necromancy of Henry Higgins. The play itself is not one of Mr. Shaw's most dazzling exhibitions of virtuosity. He is not here so incandescent in wit, so captivatingly audacious, as he is capable of being; yet it is still true of him that he makes every one of his contemporaries among writers for the stage seem, by comparison, a little flat and lymphatic, a little prosaic and quotidian. It is not easy to imagine "Pygmalion" without Mrs. Campbell's expert and delicious characterization of the transformed flower-girl; one refuses to believe that any other actress now on the stage could make Eliza live before us with an equal vividness and completeness. She must fill with happiness the heart of Mr. Shaw—especially in that unforgettable scene in the third act when the Professor exhibits for the first time, in his mother's drawing-room, the finished product of his experiments. We love to remember her painfully meticulous delivery of polite commonplaces concerning the weather, followed by a transition to more personal matters, and then that wonderful, that breath-catching recital—in the language of the slums but with the intonation of Mayfair—of old man Doolittle's dalliance with the grape:

"It never," recites Eliza, with fastidiously polished enunciation, "did him no harm, what I could see. But then he did not keep it up regular. On the burst, as you might say, from time to time. And always more agreeable when he had a drop in. When he was out of work, my mother used to give him fourpence and tell him to go out and not come back until he'd drunk himself cheerful and loving-like. There's lots of women has to make their husbands drunk to make them fit to live with. You see, it's like this: If a man has a bit of a conscience, it always takes him when he's sober; and then it makes him low-spirited. A drop of booze just takes that off and makes him happy."

It is the fault neither of Mrs. Campbell, nor of Mr. Shaw, by the way, that the famous epithet which was intended to

horrify British ears falls quite innocuously upon the hearing of New York audiences at Wallack's.

"What is life," says Higgins, "but a series of inspired follies?" That—almost—is a description of Mr. Shaw at his best: a creator of inspired follies; and it all but fits his "Pygmalion." Would that all the comedies of the absurdly lamented past came as near to deserving it as does this delightful whimsicality, so superlatively realized, in its central feature, by the admirable craft of Mrs. Campbell.

If we are still in some doubt as to the decay of the art of acting in our time, let us proceed now to the playhouse where that unpredictable genius, David Belasco, has seen fit to set before us one of the most ingenious and original comedies that the metropolitan stage has witnessed in many a day, but which is no more memorable than the acting that gives it life.

"The Phantom Rival" is an adaptation, by the accomplished Mr. Leo Ditrichstein, of Ferenc Molnar's "Das Märchen vom Wolf." Molnar's play is based upon the romantic thesis that every woman treasures in her heart of hearts an idealized, a glorified image of her first love: an image which persists, which is not dislodged by any subsequent attachments, even though she may marry happily—some one else. And surely it is among the strangest and most touching revelations of our humanity (as we have elsewhere observed) that there is no one so prosaic, so complacent, so alien to romance as not to bear in some inner chamber of the heart some secretly cherished portrait, perhaps dim with age, from which gazes a once beloved face—a chamber into which one looks, it may be every day, it may be but once in a decade, to dream a little, to long a little, perhaps to regret a little more. Is it not incredible, Molnar might say to us, that the eupeptic mistress of your neighbor's household—a blameless wife, an irreproachable mother, a pillar of the Ladies' Culture Club, a beacon of rectitude—should be in certain reminiscent hours a dream-haunted wanderer in enchanted woods, a silent worshiper in some temple whose hidden place is known only to her? So we see Louise—Louise, a happy wife and mother—dreaming of her girlhood's sweetheart, the ardent young Russian, Taticheff; we can almost hear her murmuring to herself in broken, Lesbian cadences,

I loved thee,  
... of old time, once,  
... long since in old-time overpast."

But Molnar has the prophylactic gift of comic irony; so he shows you what happens, in nine cases out of ten, when the girl who has enshrined her early lover encounters him in the flesh in later life—when the man that was is confronted with the man that is. Dozing before her fire, Louise has splendid dreams of him; she visions him as a great general, a great statesman, a great singer. And note, by the way, the delicate justice, the rare fidelity, with which these dream passages are handled by the playwright; for they have the inconsequence, the abruptness of transition, the fluid quality of sleep-chasings; and note also the happy inspiration which has prompted Molnar to present these glorious visions as they would naturally appear to the crude and expansive imaginings of a young girl; the mighty general, as he tells her, rose from the ranks in less than a month; the statesman holds monarchs in the hollow of his hand, partitions empires, plays with the nations of the world as if he were overlord of the cosmos. And then—and then—Louise awakens, to meet the *real* Taticheff. Alas, he is no general, no statesman, no conquering artist; he is private secretary to an eminent traveling Russian—a most obsequious little man, politely servile, with his "yes, *Madame*; no, *Madame*." He remembers Louise with difficulty; indeed, he is engaged to a girl at home in his native Russia, the daughter of a farmer who is rich in pigs.

Poor Louise! Her heart is rid of its cloudy dreams; she can laugh at them now; and, after all, is not her husband, though a little jealous, the best of men? And yet one cannot but wonder if, in some downcast hour, she does not say over to herself, with just a shade of bitterness,

... I would not find;  
For when I find, I know  
I shall have claspt the wandering wind  
And built a house of snow."

A comedy of real substance, charm, wit, is this of Molnar's; and how delightfully, how satisfyingly, it is produced and acted at the Belasco! Here again we have, in the Louise of Miss Crews and the Taticheff (in his five incarnations) of Mr. Ditrichstein, acting, in the vein of high comedy,

of the most expert kind—full of insight, finesse, imagination, and technical dexterity. Particularly engrossing was the fivefold characterization of Mr. Dittrichstein—a performance worthy of Richard Mansfield.

To those who, after witnessing the performances which we have particularized in these notes, are not yet persuaded that excellent miming is still a very common thing on our stage, we would suggest further investigations: we would recommend that they observe the eloquent and distinguished acting of Miss Elsie Ferguson in Klaw and Erlanger and Mr. Frohman's production of Mr. Davies's "Outcast," at the Lyceum; of Mr. Faversham and Mr. Tearle (not to speak of the admirable French player, Mademoiselle Gabrielle Dorziat) in de Croisset's "The Hawk," at the Shubert; of Mr. Leon Quartermaine in Mr. Brady's production of Knoblauch's "My Lady's Dress," at the Playhouse; and of a dozen other players whom we could name if we had the requisite time and space. And when we can add that the inexhaustibly delectable Marie Tempest is now to be seen in repertoire, under the auspices of the Messrs. Shubert, at the Comedy, has it not been sufficiently indicated that histrionic capacity has scarcely as yet vanished wholly from our contemporary stage?

Why does the younger generation of our native composers persist in offering us, with so bland and childlike an unconsciousness, music which is so often merely a gesture of homage to the particular composer who happens to represent the prevailing musical fashion of the hour? It is, of course, easy to understand the attraction which a powerful creative mind must exercise over a youthful artist of sensibility: it is easy to understand why our youngsters caper so readily to-day to the piping of Debussy; but why do they exhibit their performances in public with so naïve a pride, as if they had learned the trick without a master? The other day an admirable singer of songs, Mr. Reinald Werrenrath, gave a concert at Æolian Hall in the course of which he sang a group of *Lieder* by certain of the junior American composers. There was not one of these songs that lacked certain valuable possessions; they displayed a measure of poetic and emotional sensibility, competent craftsmanship, a command of eloquent utterance, an occasional mastery of beauti-

ful speech. The sensibility and the craftsmanship it was a pleasure to recognize; it was much less of a pleasure to note that the eloquence and the beauty were in no case self-sprung: they were derivative. They were, chiefly, dilute Debussy. Now Debussy's music is interesting only when written by Debussy—as Debussy himself is interesting only when he is speaking his own native tongue: we have as strong a distaste for this great master when (as in some of the interludes of "*Pelléas et Mélisande*") his voice is the voice of Wagner, as we have for those accomplished young American song-writers who, with apparently naïve unconsciousness, speak the language of Debussy. It is simple justice to them to say that Europe, especially France, England, and Russia, is full of composers, both eminent and inconspicuous, who have adopted the unmistakable ways of Debussy as their own—fatuously and ineffectual Lilliputians who, with absurd and pavonine pride, strut about in the exquisite vestments of the unique musical personality of our time. Second-hand Debussy is just as unacceptable when we encounter it in the brilliant and ingenious Ravel as when it confronts us in the oddly ingenuous productions of our own modernistic young tone-poets.

Mr. Ernest Newman has said, with point and truth, that nothing can prevent composers of one country "assimilating, if they want to, the technical methods and the harmonic discoveries of composers of any other country." That is indisputable. MacDowell, for example, "assimilated" Wagner and Liszt and Grieg; but he also gave us—MacDowell. Let our young men be a little more brave and forthright: let them derive all the liberating and quickening impulses they can from Debussy, or from Strauss, or from Schönberg, or from any one else who can kindle their creative fires; but let them not forget for an instant that unless their music is personal, individual, self-sprung, it is less than nothing. The world does not want to hear their accounts of Debussy's soul; it wants to hear their accounts of their own. We would remind them of these lines from Swinburne's "*In the Twilight*":

What if the morning awake  
Never of us to be seen?  
Yet, if we die, if we live,  
That which we have will we give.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.